

Muhammad: The Ideal Character



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FOREWORD

Mankind needs a set of moral principles having universal validity as well as a real personality in which these moral principles are exemplified. The Prophet Muhammad is the only answer to the question. He proclaimed the ethics which bear the stamp of divine authenticity, and is, moreover, a model of perfect conduct and character for all mankind.

This book, though a preliminary statement of the case, present the life and teachings of Muhammad (peace be upon him) as an ideal for all mankind. The author believes that the Prophet Muhammad's life is the only historical exemplification of the ideal man for a unified world morality.



MUHAMMAD THE IDEAL CHARACTER

Muhammad (Peace be upon him), the Prophet of Islam, is generally believed to have been born in Arabia on 22nd April 571 A.D. and to have died on 8th June 632 A.D. His childhood gave indications of the sublime and vigorous personality that was to emerge and, as he grew up, handsome and powerfully built, the greatness of his persona overawed all who came into his presence. But he was so soft-spoken and genial in disposition that anyone who came into contact with him inevitably loved and respected him. He evinced such traits as tolerance, forbearance and truthfulness, along with a fine understanding of men and their affairs. His was a balanced personality and the example he set was one of noble, human greatness. Da'ud ibn Husain says that even from his earliest youth he had the reputation of being the best mannered of all his people—full of solicitude for his neighbours, kind and understanding, truthful and trustworthy. He sedulously avoided quarrels, never quibbled over anything and was never heard to use foul or abusive language. People never hesitated to entrust their valuables to him, for his trustworthiness was



unimpeachable. In fact it had earned for him the title of *al-amin*, —faultless custodian, unfailing trustee.

On the occasion of his marriage at the age of twenty five, his uncle, Abu Talib, made a speech in the course of which he said, “Compare my nephew Muhammad, son of Abdullah, with anyone you know: he will outshine him in nobility, gentility, eminence and wisdom. By God, he has a great future and will reach a very high station”. Abu Talib did not attach to these words the sense in which later events proved them to be true; he meant, of course, that anyone possessing such virtues and such a versatile personality was bound to rise in the world and to acquire a distinguished position in its affairs. Little did he realize in what an otherworldly and non-material sense all of this would come true.

The would-be Prophet possessed great potentialities, which he could have turned to advantage. His qualities had greatly impressed a rich, forty-year-old widow called Khadijah, who offered herself to him in marriage. She had been the



wife of one of the leading merchants in Makkah and when the Prophet married her, he found that a vast field of business in Arabia and beyond was thrown open to him. He now had every opportunity to lead a successful and contented life. But this was not to be. For the Prophet attached no importance to worldly affluence and deliberately chose a path which ran counter to it. Before his marriage he had earned his livelihood in a variety of ways, but now he gave up all these occupations and plunged into the quest for truth and reality. He neglected, too, to keeping up social relations, made no efforts to gain eminence, and instead, would wander in the hills and caves, absorbed in the profoundest of thoughts. He would ponder over the mysteries of creation, of life and death, of good and evil, and try to find order and light amidst chaos and gloom. Often he used to repair to the loneliness of a cave on Mount Hira, and stay there till his meagre supply of food and water was exhausted. He would go back home only to replenish his supplies, then would return to the solitude of nature to pray and meditate, struggling to find answers to the questions which surged through his consciousness.



It was no small matter for a young man to adopt this course in the prime of his life. In effect, it meant renouncing worldly happiness and treading a path ridden with difficulty and sorrow. He had all the means and opportunities one could conceive of for a comfortable life, but his turbulent soul found no satisfaction in them. So little charm did they hold for him that he was consumed with restlessness. Not until he had discovered the reality of things and had solved the mysteries of creation would he achieve tranquility of spirit. Endlessly he sought answers to the questions irresistibly arising within him: Whence do I come? To what end am I destined? Has my life a purposive goal? Is there any ultimate reality behind all external appearances?

His quest had reached a point where life itself had become an intolerable burden. But at last God, in His infinite mercy, turned towards him and threw open to him the gates of enlightenment and guidance. "And when He found thee struggling in mind (to find the right way), did He not show thee the way? (Quran, 93:7)



In the fortieth year of his life, one day, while he was sitting in the solitude of the cave, an angel of God appeared before him in human shape, and accosted him with the words of God: “Announce in the name of thy Lord, that He hath created—created man from a clot—Announce! And the Lord is most generous. Who hath afforded knowledge through the pen. Afforded man the Knowledge of what he knew not ...” (Quran, 96:1-5)

The Prophet had found the answers to his questions. “Have We not broadened thy heart for thee, and relieved thee of the burden which had weighed down thy back ...” (The Quran 94:1-3). His restless soul was now in communion with the Lord of the Universe. God now chose him as His special envoy and gave him guidance. The Revelation of God began descending upon him and continued to do so for twenty-three years, at the end of which time, the last Scripture of God, the Quran, reached completion.

The Prophet of Islam had discovered the Truth, but not before the fortieth year of his difficult life, and it was an attainment which brought with it no ease or



comfort. The truth that he had discovered was that man was in the power of Almighty God. It was essentially a discovery of how humble and powerless he himself was before God's superb omnipotence, of his own nothingness before the supernal magnitude of God. It was a discovery of the fact, hitherto little understood, that for a believer there is nothing in this world but responsibility. As for rights, he has none.

The meaning and purpose of life for the Prophet after he had made this discovery are clearly set forth in his sayings:

To fear God openly and secretly in every state,
To follow justice whether calm or angry,
To practise moderation whether rich or poor,
To reunite my sundered friendships,
To give to him who takes away,
To gladly pardon my oppressors,
And seek the silent ways of meditation,
To utter words in God's remembrance.
And look around me knowledge to acquire.



These sublime thoughts and poignant utterances could not be those of an empty man. They externalise his inner being and are a clear indication of his moral stature. In these words his whole life is reflected. Even before the dawn of Prophethood, the Prophet's life had followed such a pattern, but it had been instinctive and without deliberation. Now the discovery of truth lent discernment to his attitudes and behaviour, and what had formerly been inherent in him now became a well conceived part and product of profound thinking. There was now an intensified awareness in all his thoughts and actions. The exigencies of worldly life having been reduced to the barest minimum, his living assumed an entirely different pattern from that of his fellow men. In bodily appearance he lived in this world, but, spiritually, he was on a different plane.

An important statement which the Prophet made at this time concerned the special moments that there should be in the lives of the prudent.

There should be

Moments when one should commune with God.

Moments when one should be one's own assessor,

Moments when one should be reflecting upon the mysteries of creation,

And also moments for the acquisition of the necessities of life.

In other words, the faithful servant of God is so given over to piety that he finds himself close to God, in divine communion with him, he so fears the Day of Judgement that his time is spent in constant self-appraisal, he ponders over the marvellous creation of God that he sees His splendour reflected everywhere. In this way he spends his days meeting his Lord, meeting himself, meeting the world, and meeting his bodily requirements. And each of these experiences has its special moment. These words reflect the personality of the Prophet. They show the restlessness of the believing and faithful soul and are an indication of his absorption in otherworldly affairs. A man who had not experienced such absorption would not be capable



of describing it with such sublimity of expression. These are the utterances of a perfect soul who wishes in his goodness to guide others to this same state of perfection.

Before God's revelations began to be made to the Prophet, the world with all its shortcomings, faults and limitations appeared meaningless to him. But when God revealed to him that there is a world other than the present one, a world which is perfect and eternal—the real abode of man—he found new meaning and purpose both in this life and in the universe. He found the world not just a place where he could subsist, but a place of wonder and fascination. It was a world now on which he could pin his hopes and for which he could make plans for the future, even taking into account its ephemerality. For him now, the world was a place which had to be tilled so that men might reap their rewards in the hereafter, and all his actions were oriented towards this end. He attached real value to the life beyond the grave, for he had become keenly aware of the fact that this world is not our final destination, but only the starting point and path leading to the future life. Everything we did here in



this world was only by way of preparation. In all matters his attitude was determined by the thought of how it would affect the quality of his existence in the hereafter. Whether the occasion for him was one of happiness or sorrow, success or failure, domination or oppression, praise or obloquy, love or hatred, the guiding thought was always that of the hereafter. He was in no way lacking in human qualities, but his mind attached value only to things which were in some manner connected with the Hereafter, and when any such connection was absent, he found it difficult to take an interest in the purely mundane. He would often say to those who found him indifferent to the affairs of this world, "You know your worldly matters better than I do myself". This conviction of the Prophet is no mere intellectual assumption. When it takes root, a man's whole course of life and plane of living are altered by it; it turns a man into a being of an entirely different order. The lesson of the Prophet's life is that unless the plane of living is radically changed, there can be no improvement in the quality of one's actions. When the Prophet arrived at this truth, its propagation became his greatest concern. Paradise, tidings of which he brought to his fellowmen,



became his prime objective, and his fear of hell, of which likewise he gave warning to others, knew no bounds. His inner agitation would repeatedly manifest itself in his invocations and sincere repentance. How his way of life differed from that of his contemporaries can be inferred from certain incidents, which we narrate below.

Umm Salamah, a wife of the Prophet, tells of how, when the Prophet was visiting her house, he once called the maidservant. The girl did not make her appearance, so Umm Salamah pulled back the curtain to reveal the maidservant idling away her time outside. The Prophet was annoyed. Showing the maidservant the little switch he held in his hand, he told her that had it not been that he feared divine retribution on the Day of Judgement, he would have struck her with it. Even the mildest of punishment was to be eschewed for fear of God.

The prisoners of war taken captive at the battle of Badr (Ramadhan, 2.A.H.) were amongst his bitterest enemies. Nevertheless, he made sure that they were given the best of treatment. Among them was Suhail ibn Amr who was a fiery speaker and in the



habit of virulently denouncing the Prophet. Umar Faruq, one of his close companions, suggested that two of his lower teeth be pulled out, so that he might not be so vile in his speeches. The Prophet replied, "Were I to do this, God would disfigure me on the Day of Judgement, notwithstanding the fact that I am His messenger."

The Prophet of Islam was a man like other men. Joyous things would please him, while tragic things would sadden him. But his humanity would not go beyond the limits set by God.

Towards the end of his life a handsome, healthy son was born to him, whom he named Ibrahim after his most illustrious ancestor. The news of the birth was conveyed to him by Abu Rafi, and the Prophet was so overjoyed that he immediately presented him with a slave. Like any other father, he used to take the child in his lap and fondle him. By Arab custom he was handed over to a wet nurse to be brought up. This woman's name was Umm Bardah, the daughter of Mundhir, and she was the wife of a blacksmith. Quite often her small house would be filled with smoke, but this did not deter the Prophet



from paying frequent visits to his son. Tragically, this child did not survive. He died at the age of one and a half in the tenth year after the Prophet had emigrated to Madinah. Just like any other ordinary man, the Prophet wept at his son's death. He had the same feelings and aspirations as any father might have, but this in no way diminished his trust in God. He held fast to it and in his sorrow exclaimed, "By God! Oh Ibrahim, I am sad at your death. Tears are falling from my eyes and there is anguish in my heart, but, I will say nothing that may displease my Lord."

On the day of Ibrahim's death, there was a solar eclipse. A belief had been handed down from ancient times that solar and lunar eclipses were occasioned by the deaths of important personages. The people of Madinah, therefore, began talking of the death of the Prophet's son as being the cause of solar eclipse. The Prophet then assembled the people and addressed them: "The sun and moon do not go into eclipse because of the death of any human being. They are two portents amongst the portents of God. When an eclipse occurs, you should busy yourself in prayers."



On one of his journeys, the Prophet asked his followers to roast a goat. One said that he would slaughter the animal, another said that he would skin it, while a third said that he would cook it. The Prophet then said that he would collect wood for fuel. Their response was, "Oh, Messenger of God! We will do everything." The Prophet then said, "I have no doubt that you will. But I do not like distinctions to be made, nor does God like any one of His servants to assert his superiority over his companions."

His self-deprecation was such that he once said, "By God, I do not know, even although I am God's messenger, what my fate in the next world will be, nor do I know what yours will be."

Abu Dharr Ghifari narrates that one day he was sitting with another companion of black complexion whom he addressed as, "O black man." When the Prophet heard of this, he was greatly displeased and cautioned Abu Dharr never to make disparaging remarks to anyone, whoever he might be, and to mete out equal treatment to all, adding,



“No white man has any superiority over a black man.

The Prophet once saw a wealthy Muslim gathering up his loose garment so that a certain distance would be kept between himself and a poor Muslim sitting close by. He remarked, “Do you fear that his poverty will cling to you?”

Although, in the later years of his life, a proper Muslim state had been set up at Madinah with the Prophet at its head, he lived like any ordinary person, and did not assume any superior rights. He once had to borrow some money from a Jew called Zaid ibn Sana’a. The Jew came to demand the immediate return of the loan a few days before the expiry of the stipulated period. Tugging at the mantle around the Prophet’s shoulders he jibed that the progeny of Abd al Muttalib were always defaulters. Umar Faruq, not being able to tolerate this misbehaviour on the part of the Jew, started berating him, and was on the point of beating him when the Prophet said to the Jew, smiling, “There are still three days to go before the promise has to be fulfilled. To Umar Faruq he said, “We might



have had better treatment from you. You could have advised me to be more punctilious about the return of loans and you could have advised the Jew to be more courteous in demanding repayment.” He then requested Umar to procure some dates so that the loan could be repaid, and to give the Jew an extra forty kilograms for the rebuke he had been given.

When the Prophet of Islam had become the ruler of Arabia, whatever he said, as the messenger of God, was law. He was venerated by his people as no man had ever been venerated. Urwah ibn Mas’ud, the envoy of the Quraysh at the time of the Hudaibiyya settlement, was amazed to see that the water used by the Prophet in performing his ablutions was never allowed to fall on the ground. People would catch it as it fell, and would rub it on their faces. His close companion, Anas, says that in spite of the great love they had for the Prophet, they could not look him full in the face. They could not look him straight in the eye. Mughira says that if any companion had to knock at his door, he did so softly with his fingertips. At the battle of Hunain, when the Muslims were suffering an initial setback,



the enemy forces deluged the Prophet with arrows, but his devoted followers made a ring around him and took the brunt of the arrows on their own bodies.

Such devotion and veneration would make any man vain. They would engender a feeling of distinct superiority. But in the case of the Prophet, they did not have the slightest effect. His conduct was as unassuming as ever. Nor could biting criticism or provocation make him lose his balance. Anas tells of how a rustic approached the Prophet and pulled his mantle so hard that it left its mark on his neck. He asked the Prophet to give him two camel loads of merchandise, jibing that the goods belonged neither to him nor to his father. The Prophet replied that the rightful owner was God, and that he—the Prophet—was only His servant. He asked the rustic if he felt no fear at having behaved with such temerity. The rustic said he did not, knowing full well that the Prophet never returned evil for evil. At this the Prophet smiled and had one of his camels loaded with barley and another with dates, and then gave them both to the rustic.



The fear of God never left the Prophet and he was always a picture of humility and meekness. He spoke little and had adopted a stooping gait, always calling himself a servant of God, he dressed and ate just like any other human being. One of his companions once completed an assertion with the condition, "If it be the will of God and the will of the Prophet." At this he became so angry that his face changed colour, and he sternly rebuked the man saying, "You are trying to equate me with God. You should limit yourself to saying 'If God so wills.'"

The Prophet had four daughters, the youngest and most adored of whom was Fatima. She was married to Ali and had to do all the work of the household herself. She had to grind the corn, carry the water bag, sweep the floor, etc. Ali therefore advised her to approach her father for a servant. She went to her father's house for this very purpose, but could not find an opportunity to speak to him because of the throngs of people assembled there. The next day the Prophet came to their house, and asked why it was that Ali had sent Fatima to him, when he heard the reason, he said "O Fatima! Fear God, fulfill your



obligations and do the work of the household. When you are going to sleep, recite 'Glory to God' 33 times, 'Praise to God' 33 times and 'God is Great' 34 times. That would be much better than having a servant." Fatima replied that what was pleasing to God and the Prophet was likewise pleasing to her.

The truth which was revealed to the Prophet was that the universe did not spring up by itself without a Creator, that Almighty God is the Master of all things, that all men are His creatures and servants and, as such, are responsible to Him and, most important of all, that death does not mean annihilation: on the contrary it is the gateway to a permanent life in another world which is replete with every bliss. For the good, there is the blessing of paradise and for the evil-doers, there is the agony of hell. God having ordained that this truth should be widely proclaimed for the guidance of mankind, the Prophet scaled the heights of the rock of Safa and addressed the throngs assembled there: "By God, you have to die as you sleep, and rise again after death as you wake up. Accordingly, you will have to render an account of your deeds. Good deeds will be amply rewarded and evil deeds will



be sternly punished. You will live thereafter either in the Garden of Bliss or in the Fire of Hell.”

If a man runs counter to the trends of the times, his every step is beset with difficulties. This is particularly true when he launches himself on a religious mission against the ingrained habits of irreligion. People, who become set in their ways, are seldom willing to listen to the voice of change. The Prophet in his role of believer and missionary, therefore, found himself at loggerheads with his own countrymen. Bent, as he was, on preaching the word of God, he ran headlong into clashes with his own people. His trials and tribulations were legion, hunger and privation being regular features of his early missionary days.

He even had to suffer assaults on his person, and there were pitched battles between his converts and the infidels. In the third year after his emigration, his opponents mounted an assault on Madinah and the battle of Uhud took place. At the outset, the Muslims had the upper hand, but, because of some misguided strategy on the part of some of his followers, the enemy forces attacked from the rear,



and managed to turn the tables. It was a desperate situation. Many of his followers started to flee from the field and he found himself surrounded by the enemy's ranks. He called upon his followers to rally around him to show their mettle and to fight for the glories of Paradise. He called upon them to remain his companions in the Afterlife. Some of his Muslim soldiers did then turn back to protect him, but, try as they might, they could not make an impenetrable ring around him with the result that he was badly wounded. Utba ibn Abi Waqqas hurled a stone at his face, knocking out some of his lower teeth and Abdullah ibn Qumayya, a famous Qurayshi wrestler, struck him so savagely with his battle-axe that two links of his helmet pierced his face. Another of the enemy soldiers, Abdullah ibn Shahab Zuhri struck his forehead with a stone and the Prophet fell into a pit, bleeding profusely.

The enemy raised a triumphant cry that the Prophet had been killed, and this extinguished whatever little morale was left in the Muslim forces. A companion however, came upon the Prophet lying in the pit, and shouted that he was alive. The situation was so horrifying that he wondered aloud



how people who injured their Prophet were ever to find salvation. This observation was displeasing to God and Gabriel was sent with the revelation: "You have no authority over matters. It is for God to guide them to repentance for their conduct and to punish them as oppressors." This admonition was enough to make the Prophet's anger subside. Wiping away the blood which was gushing from his wounds, he prayed for the people: "O God! Forgive my people for they know not what they do!"

Such incidents abound in the traditions of the Prophet which have been handed down to posterity. They demonstrate the exemplary qualities of his exalted character, at the same time showing that man is unconditionally God's servant, and must remain so at all times and in all circumstances. The relationship of God and man is that which is ideally based on man's constant fear of God and his awareness of the Hereafter. Every single thing in the universe should serve to remind him of God. He should recognize his signs in every particle that exists. In all worldly matters he should never forget that God is the final arbiter. Fear of hell should



instill in him an attitude of humility and courtesy to others, and eagerness for paradise should make the world unreal and of trifling importance in his eyes. God's greatness should so preoccupy him that any idea of demonstrating his own greatness should appear to be of the utmost frivolity. No criticism should provoke him. Neither should he be made vain by praise.

Many things happened to the Prophet which, on the one hand, could have turned his head—like excessive adulation, and his final success in, converting large numbers to Islam—or, on the other hand, could have left him a hopeless and embittered man—like the dishonourable treatment meted out to him at Taif and the initial rejection of his teachings by so many of his people. But he never allowed his success to make him conceited, nor did he ever allow adversity to plunge him in despair, for his life was completely governed by piety and the fear of God, and right to the end of his life—for twenty three years—he remained the steadfast champion of justice and moral rectitude. This is the ideal human character which the Prophet displayed throughout his entire life.